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ICT Diffusion: Have we really made any progress?

Essay by Sabri Saidam, September 18, 2009 in response to A Dialogue on ICTs, Human Development, Growth, and Poverty Reduction

It is undoubted that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is often considered as one of the main pillars for human and socio-economic development. It is therefore widely recognized that ICTs are becoming increasingly popular as tools for improving human, technical and financial capital for the benefit of individuals, communities and nation-states. It is for this reason that the entire world has embarked in recent years on promoting ICT for Development (ICT4D). We are therefore often invited to play a critical role in defining and shaping the ICT4D discourse and best practice taking into account socio-cultural, economic and political environments. This is a vital way for ensuring that the ICT4D agenda of the Information Society movement does not join previous doctrines of science, technology and development in becoming yet another missed opportunity.

The intermarriage between ICTs and development is rapidly drawing the attention of local communities, civil society and donor countries. A belief is growing in the ability of such a connection to expedite development. Meetings and conferences have been designed to explore the possibility of crafting such a step and enable a massive acceleration of economic and social development that will narrow the poverty gap and eliminate many obstacles to prosperity and equality. Chief amongst them was the world Summit on Information Society (WSIS) which was hopeful in its endevour to cash on the global 'good will'. Six years since Harvard I and following two rounds of WSIS in 2003 and 2005, one is invited to examine progress and analyze conditions with a great deal of attention and wisdom.

In doing so one is invited to play a pro-active role in maintaining the ICT and development ‘marriage’ and avoid a historical reoccurrence of missed opportunities. Global networking, partnership and cooperation are in desperate demand so to serve to strengthen this approach.

What's affecting progress?

The world is witnessing different impediments in addressing the concerns of 'southern' states:

1- Lack of leadership in ICT deployment and diffusion.
2- Absence of consistent awareness programs that address the benefits of ICT dissemination. In fact some concerns appear when ICT is tested against religious beliefs and social values.
3- Allegiance to a donor-driven agenda often affects national development. ICT is often put on the back burner, giving way to relief driven agendas or politically motivated financial support.
4- Absence of a legal environment conducive to ICT prosperity.
5- Weakness of the educational system and financial hardship clearly affect ICT enhancement and deployment.
6- Lack of market competitiveness and telecom regulation coupled with serious corruption and abuse of authority which often leads to establishing lucrative telecom operators often owned by ruling families or their close associates.

What needs to be done?

1- What is needed is greater openness and information exchange amongst nations so to achieve

harmony and factual progress seriously capitalizing on lessons learned.

In its elaboration on the importance of ICT, the UNDP's Human Development Report 2003 –"Towards Building an Arab Knowledge Society", associates ICT with state assets that need to be cultivated, improved and regionally harmonized. The report further emphasizes the message of the Human Development Report 2001: Making New Technologies Work for Human Development, that in turn confirms that technology is not inherently good or bad; but rather its outcome depends on how it is used.

2- Concerns over major ICT issues such as Internet centralization, communication rights, software legality, capacity building, etc. could further draw 'Northern' and 'Southern' nations together closer.

There are in fact six ways in which Northern and Southern CSOs could further collaborate in order to produce tangible ICT4D in the less developed nations.

The first is capacity building: Knowledge creation and capacity building is one way of finding out the contribution of ICTs in developing countries . This should include deliberate efforts to package skills and knowledge in the form of education and training, including maintenance and control of ICTs.

The second issue is to help in formulating local ICT 'deployable and realistic' strategies in Southern countries that should put an end to chaotic ICT approaches.

The third issue is based on the need to deeply look into the local involvement in direct acceleration of ICT access through provision of necessary ICT equipment, resources, proper know-how of maintenance, support and close monitoring of projects' impacts, sustainability, delivery and added value.

The fourth factor is based on the need to encourage acquisition of appropriate ICT projects relevant to less developed nations' needs and conditions.

The fifth issue is that financial aid should be based on value levels and not on the often-pressing need for survival that may stir Southern countries into unworthy project tracks and defunct initiatives. Politically motivated financing will never serve national development.

The sixth issue is based on the assumption that the Northern-Southern nation's relationship is not always that of donor vs. beneficiary. Some Northern countries do not have funding power. However, they have a wealth of knowledge and lessons drawn from various Southern countries where they operated. Such knowledge if shared with Southern countries will almost certainly provide guidance and help in avoiding duplicate mistakes and misgivings in performance and service delivery.

In conclusion, there is a dire need for a more horizontal, participatory approach amongst nations rather than hierarchical relationship. There is also a need to enhance local context and local capacity-building, especially to create value so that ICTs are not just channels for transmission of skewed information/funding but tools for creating a better and calculated future.

[1] Boer, Leen (2001), Technology and Development: A Case of Schizophrenia, Third World Quarterly 22(5): 865-871.

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